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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RABAT 000396

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [PHUM](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: MOROCCO: LEADER OF ISLAMIST JCO DECRIES
"DESPOTISM" AND "PERSECUTION" (C-NE6-01280)

REF: A. 06 STATE 137289

- [1](#)B. 06 RABAT 1414
- [1](#)C. 06 RABAT 1371
- [1](#)D. 06 RABAT 1105
- [1](#)E. 05 RABAT 0503
- [1](#)F. 04 RABAT 2214

Classified by D/Polcouns Ian McCary for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: A senior leader of Morocco's Islamist Justice and Charity Organization (JCO) denounced the Moroccan state as a corrupt and despotic regime and claimed government "persecution" of the group and its members was much worse today than in the era of Hassan II, in our first conversation with the group since mid-2006. The JCO calls for replacing the Moroccan monarchy through comprehensive constitutional reform, and is critical of the Islamist PJD's approach of engaging in the current political system. Unsurprisingly given the GOM's current crackdown on the group, our interlocutor was vague when asked about the JCO's own leadership structure. End summary.

[¶](#)2. (C) After several months of unsuccessful attempts to make contact, Abdelwahid Motawakil, President of the JCO's Political Council and member of the group's four person Guidance Bureau, received poloff for a two-hour meeting on the evening of February 22. The meeting took place in a relatively spartan villa in a middle class neighborhood of Sale, Rabat's poorer and more conservative twin city to the north. The villa is the former residence of JCO Spiritual leader Sheikh Abdelsalam Yassin and now serves as the JCO's de facto headquarters. (Note: Last fall, the aging and reportedly ill Sheikh Yassin traded his digs in Sale for a villa in the upscale Rabat neighborhood of Souissi. End note.)

The State is Despotic and Corrupt

[¶](#)3. (C) Motawakil opened with a scathing denunciation of the Moroccan state - a corrupt and despotic regime interested only in preserving itself at the expense of the people, he maintained. "It is a gross insult that 50 percent of the people of this country should live in illiteracy." Poverty and degradation is a reality for the majority of Moroccans, he added - the state has taken no real interest in the welfare of the people. On the contrary, he contended, the state believed an ignorant populace easier to control and exploit.

[¶](#)4. (C) Corruption, Motawakil continued, is endemic and pervasive in Moroccan public life. Tons of narcotics are grown and processed in Morocco, in front of the government's eyes. Parliament members purchase their seats and the payment of bribes to police and bureaucrats is the norm.

King Mohammed VI is more interested than his father in business, Motawakil maintained. The King and his circle of friends are aggressively moving into the private sector, using their power and influence to crush competitors. "We used to talk just about the political makhzen (elite power structure), now we are talking about the economic makhzen as well."

15. (C) Asked about the unprecedented reforms and initiatives undertaken by Mohammed VI, many aimed at addressing bad legacies of his father's rule, Motawakil was dismissive and derisive. There have been no "serious" efforts to combat poverty and illiteracy, he maintained, dismissing the King's National Human Development Initiative as a public relations ploy that would not reach the roots of the country's social and economic problems. Likewise, the prosecution of a "handful" of parliament members for electoral corruption (Note: 15 elected candidates for the upper house were charged with corruption after the September 2006 elections End note.) and the occasional dismissal of a few senior officials, was purely symbolic, and always for reasons other than corruption, he maintained.

No Point in Engaging

16. (C) Motawakil explained the JCO's policy of eschewing electoral politics. "The parliament can pass laws and ministries can make rules but we all know that decisions are taken in the Palace," Motawakil commented. The people have no ability to realize change under the current system. The people know this - hence their widespread apathy, he asserted. The political parties exist to support, directly

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or indirectly, the Palace and its interests. "The political class is not trusted." The Islamist Justice and Development Party, (the PJD - expected to perform well in the September parliamentary elections) will, like other parties, be powerless to implement real reform, he predicted. "You lose credibility if you compete and can't deliver," Motawakil stated, this will be the fate of the PJD, he added.

National Charter Proposal

17. (C) In this context, Motawakil maintained, the only practical and peaceful means of change is to call a conference for a new "national charter" in which all sectors of Moroccan society could participate. (Throughout the conversation Motawakil emphasized the JCO's commitment to "peaceful and gradual change" - "you cannot rule by force," he stated several times.) Delegates to the national charter conference envisioned by the JCO would shape a new constitution through consensus. "If the majority were in favor of preserving the monarchy, we would disagree, but we would accept the majority view."

18. (C) Motawakil was evasive about what type of government and society the JCO would envision for Morocco. He did not address poloff's question about the application of Sharia' law. (Note: The "dreams" or "visions" of JCO spiritual guide Sheikh Yassin, in which the monarch is toppled and replaced by a just leader with prophet-like attributes have been well publicized, including on the JCO's own website. End note.)

Persecution of the JCO

19. (C) Motawakil claimed that "persecution" of the JCO is far worse under the reign of Mohammed VI than it was under Hassan II. Since 1999, the GOM has become much more active in blocking the JCO's public activities, he stated, recalling

the closure at the beginning of the decade of "summer camps" set up by the JCO where "more than a hundred thousand" members and their families could bathe in the ocean in a "proper moral atmosphere." After the GOM, through police action, forced these facilities shut, the JCO organized mass outings to existing public beaches, to which the authorities responded, in 2001 and 2002, with mass arrests of adult male would-be beachgoers. "Even when we try to organize a picnic in the forest, the gendarmes block the roads and turn back the buses."

¶10. (C) Motawakil complained the authorities have recently been raiding JCO meetings held at private houses, particularly in the northeast towns of Oujda and Nador. "Because we are not allowed to have public meeting halls, we meet quietly in members' houses," he explained. In the past three months, five such meetings have been raided in the Oujda region, leading to brief mass arrests but (more seriously) the sealing off of the houses used. "As of last week we have a pregnant mother, and her four children, cast onto the street in their pajamas by police, with their house sealed off," he exclaimed. "There have been four similar cases in recent months." (Note: Stories about the raids and house closures have appeared widely in the local press. End note.)

Legal Purgatory

¶11. (C) Asked for clarification of the JCO's status under Moroccan law, Motawakil winced. "Don't try to understand, there is no logic applied." The JCO is not a licensed NGO, but no law prohibits its existence, he maintained. "The JCO is deemed illegal because the state says we are illegal. They don't need a real basis in law to do this." (Note: The GOM has previously rejected the JCO's attempts to register under Morocco's association law. After the JCO stepped up outreach activities in 2005, the GOM's legal stance toward the group became more aggressive, maintaining that it was not only unrecognized but illegal - operating in violation of the association law. End note.)

¶12. (C) Motawakil passed poloff a document prepared by the JCO's "lawyers' council" containing statistics summarizing recent government legal actions against the council. According to the document, in the eight month period from June 1 2006 to February 20, 2007 641 JCO members (12 women) were facing prosecution (mainly for membership in an illegal association and related activities), with the highest proportion (387) in the Fes-Oujda region.

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"Are You for Freedom or Not?"

¶14. (C) Motawakil urged the U.S. to condemn the GOM's "persecution" of the JCO, in clear violation of recognized human rights principles, he maintained. "One word from the U.S. and the whole situation could change," he believed. "Either you are for democracy or you not," he challenged, "if you support freedom, show us that you mean it.... if not, continue to support autocracy, but do not be surprised if this leads to violence and anarchy."

¶15. (C) Poloff responded that human rights and political reform are central features of our bilateral dialogue with the GOM. The U.S. has long been a leader in advocating universal human rights principles including freedom of religion, freedom of association, and freedom from arbitrary arrest. Our annual human rights report publicly documents various USG concerns about human rights practices in Morocco, including those against the JCO.

The Nature of the JCO

¶16. (C) Though extroverted for most of the conversation, Motawakil became reticent when queried about the JCO's membership, organization, and leadership structure. He declined to provide a total membership statistic "for security reasons." (Note: Outside estimates of JCO membership range from 50 to 500,000. End note.) "Wherever you go in Morocco, you will find us," he stated. "Even in Layoune and Dakhla, we have many members." (Motawakil declined to elucidate a position on Western Sahara, but blamed the current political impasse on the Moroccan state's brutality. "Moroccan brutality and violence created the Polisario," he stated.)

¶17. (C) The group's public face and spiritual head, Sheikh Abdelsalam Yassin, sits at the top of the JCO's leadership pyramid. Directly beneath him is the four person "Maktab al-Irshad" (guidance bureau), of which Motawakil is a member, elected every three years by the Shura Assembly, a broad membership gathering. Motawakil's own Political Council, which reports to the guidance bureau, has 11 members, three of whom are women. Motawakil advised that the JCO also has "standing committees" on youth affairs, education, labor, and women's issues.

¶18. (C) Motawakil was reluctant to delineate any hierarchy within the JCO. "We strive for justice, but also for spiritual perfection, the two cannot be separated, it is the duty of all of us to work as hard as we can for all of these goals." He rejected the common English translation of the group's Arabic name "Al-Adl wal Ihsane." "Al Adl means 'justice,' but 'charity' is a poor translation for 'ihsane' - we prefer to call ourselves "justice and spirituality." (Note: Hans Wehr, the Arabic-English dictionary of record, defines 'ihsane' as "beneficence, charity, performance of good deeds." End note.)

Comment

¶19. (C) Despite the occasional innuendo, we are not aware of any credible allegations linking the JCO to organized violence or terror (though JCO-linked student groups have certainly been known to intimidate and occasionally brawl with rivals on campuses across the country). The GOM's tough line toward the group is doubtless based on the JCO's anti-monarchical stance - which constitutes a potentially serious political challenge, rather than an immediate public security threat. While the Islamist PJD is scathing in its criticism of the GOM, they profess loyalty to the Monarch and recognize the King's religious role as "Commander of the Faithful." This core difference with the JCO appears to make the country's two most significant Islamist groupings irreconcilable. The JCO's absence from the electoral arena is nothing new. In any case, the JCO would not be allowed to organize its own political party without pledging allegiance to the Monarch. While it is difficult to quantify, it is virtually certain that the JCO's rejection of electoral participation dilutes the impact of PJD candidates, who might otherwise look to JCO members and sympathizers as part of their natural constituency in the parliamentary elections coming this September. End comment.

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